

Downtown Turnarounds

After decades of decline, American downtowns are back—and not by accident. Ten cities illustrate downtown revival that came about by popular demand.

YOUNG ADULTS AND EMPTY nesters in particular are reversing the nationwide flight to the suburbs that started during the 1950s, embracing the pedestrian-friendly, culturally rich environment that downtowns have traditionally offered. In the 1990s, the number of people living downtown grew by 10 percent, according to research from the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Brookings Institution. Downtown sports venues, cultural institutions, and retail are making a comeback there. But what makes for a successful downtown turnaround?

Most revitalized urban cores have a solid office market, a critical mass of downtown residents, strong retail, and variety of cultural, recreational, and entertainment options tuned to the populace's interests. Also crucial are an easy-to-use public transportation system, sufficient parking, and streets that are a pleasure to walk along and that provide good linkages between uses. However, no two downtown success stories are alike. "It depends on how you define success," says David Feehan, president of the International Downtown Association in Washington, D.C. "It's different for each downtown. Some want to be the next Las Vegas, lively day and night. Some want to become a high-tech center. Others want to focus on creating a supportive environment for families—they might focus on building a great downtown elementary school, library, and science center."

Establishing a vision is crucial to a successful downtown revitalization: a formal or informal process that identifies the community's desires, determines existing strengths to build on, and fosters public support and

enthusiasm. In some cases, a strong mayor has rallied support; in others, city agencies or groups of business leaders took the lead. Some efforts have begun by jump-starting downtown housing, while others have focused first on office or cultural and entertainment uses. Feehan lists a

number of downtowns that he considers successful in reviving from the doldrums of the latter half of the 20th century. The following ten are a representative sampling.

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1. Brooklyn, New York

The controversy over the proposed Atlantic Yards Arena and Redevelopment project on downtown Brooklyn's east edge tends to overshadow the revitalization that downtown has already undergone in the past decade and a half. Crucial to the revival was the 1992 completion of the MetroTech Center, a 16-acre (6.5-ha) university/corporate park [below] built by a partnership of Polytechnic University, the city of New York, and the private sector. In 1998, the 1.5 million-square-foot (139,354-sq-m) Renaissance Plaza opened next door to MetroTech with a Marriott Hotel—the borough's first new hotel in 50 years—and office tower, creating a critical mass. Demand for office space only increased after 9/11, as displaced businesses sought affordable new locations close to Manhattan. In the past several years, residential development has boomed.



FOREST CITY RATNER

2. Charleston, South Carolina

"Charleston is legendary largely because of the efforts of one man—Mayor Joseph Riley," says David Feehan, president of the International Downtown Association in Washington, D.C. Currently serving his eighth term, Riley inherited a moribund central business district when he first became mayor in 1975. The city developed a strategic plan that encouraged new hotel construction as a way to energize street life, while discouraging waterfront development. In 1931, Charleston was the first U.S. municipality to create a historic district

zoning ordinance; the city's 1974 historic preservation plan built on that legacy, and through preservation and restoration the downtown has since developed into a strong cultural heritage attraction. Major

ROBBIE SILVER



programmed events enhance the tourist economy. The annual Spoleto Festival USA, a 17-day multidisciplinary arts festival started in 1977, now draws tens of thousands of visitors each year.

3. Des Moines, Iowa

A vision plan developed during the early 1990s established an initial blueprint for downtown Des Moines's revival, and in 1995 business leaders created the Downtown Partnership, now called the Downtown Community Alliance. The results include cultural, entertainment, and

sports attractions such as the new central branch of the public library, the 17,000-seat Iowa Events Center, and the 110,000-square-foot (10,219-sq-m) Science Center of Iowa museum, all of which opened in the last two years. The downtown continues to add hundreds of housing units each year, and the pedestrian-friendly East Village neighborhood hosts a thriving nightlife, with restored historic buildings and retail and restaurants pitched to a young, creative crowd. Currently underway is the Principal Riverwalk, a 1.2-mile (2-km) series of landscaped walking paths and bridges linking downtown from east to west, designed to tie the new developments together.



DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY ALLIANCE



4. Fargo, North Dakota

The 1996 Coen Brothers movie *Fargo* did little to enhance the city's bleak reputation, marred by a derelict downtown as much as by harsh winters. But in 1999, the city of Fargo created a downtown renaissance zone for a 20-block area (since expanded to 35 blocks). The program offers five-year income and property tax exemptions as well as historic preservation and renovation tax credits for approved projects. In addition, the for-profit Renaissance Fund Corporation raises funds to encourage capital investment and residency. Since the program's inception, millions of dollars have been invested, rehabilitating storefronts, converting vacant buildings for commercial and residential use, and sprucing up streets, bringing residents, offices, and even night-life to the downtown.

MIKE SMITH/DOWNTOWN COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

5. Kalamazoo, Michigan

In 1959, downtown Kalamazoo made history by opening the nation's first downtown pedestrian mall, a move that helped the central city compete with the rise of suburban malls—for a while. But by the late 1980s, downtown Kalamazoo was plagued by failing businesses and lifeless streets. The nonprofit Downtown Kalamazoo Inc. was formed in 1989 to encourage economic development, and with the creation of a festival site along Arcadia Creek, began attracting new investment to downtown. The 60,000-square-foot (5,574-sq-m) Kalamazoo Valley Museum, which opened in 1996 at the mall's northern edge, draws 100,000 visits each year. In 1997, the pedestrian mall [right] was reopened to vehicular traffic to make getting around downtown easier. Last year, a 70,000-square-foot (6,503-sq-m), 14-screen theater complex opened downtown, offering all-digital projection and bringing the younger crowd back from the suburbs.



DOWNTOWN KALAMAZOO INC.

6. Long Beach, California

Long dependent on two economic mainstays, Long Beach suffered a double whammy at the end of the Cold War: the city's aerospace industry downsized significantly, and then the U.S. Navy pulled anchor. Downtown gave way to cheap drinking haunts and empty storefronts. The city had to refocus its economy, with the redevelopment agency pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into the downtown. Residential, entertainment, and commercial sectors have taken off since the turn of the millennium. The mixed-use CityPlace replaced an eight-block enclosed mall in 2004, offering a mix of apartments, lofts, retail, and a full-service grocery. In 2005, the Pike

at Rainbow Harbor put 369,000 square feet (34,281 sq m) of chain retail space on the waterfront. Diners and concertgoers now crowd Pine Avenue. In addition, the city has helped fund arts events like the SoundWalk, an annual evening walking tour through the East Village arts district that draws close to 1,000 visitors.

LONG BEACH AREA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU



7. Memphis, Tennessee

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Lorraine Hotel in 1968 and the subsequent rioting, combined with the nationwide flight of higher-income households to the suburbs, left downtown Memphis desolate during the 1970s. The Center City Commission, made up of private and public sector representatives, formed in 1977 to reverse the tide, applying tax freezes, development loans, retail incentive funds, historic tax credits, and bond issues to stimulate revitalization. More than most other cities, Memphis hung its hat on residential development, and has done well: today, more than 28,000 people live in the downtown core. During the 1980s, the city bought and redeveloped most of a three-block section of Beale Street [right], reviving the home of the blues as a now-thriving entertainment district. Other significant developments include the eight-block mixed-use Peabody Place, several major downtown sports venues, a downtown trolley line, and the renovation of the Lorraine Hotel into the National Civil Rights Museum.



MEMPHIS CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

8. Pasadena, California

Old Pasadena, a historic district in Pasadena's downtown, narrowly escaped the wrecking ball during the 1980s: after a four-block swath of historic buildings was demolished to make way for an indoor mall, preservationists and other citizen groups rose up in protest and saved the rest of the blighted neighborhood for adaptive use. Since then, the downtown has blossomed with controlled growth—building heights are capped at eight stories, and high-density, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use development is encouraged. In 2003, the Los Angeles County Metro Rail connected the downtown to Los Angeles via light rail, spurring residential construction in downtown Pasadena while making it easy for shoppers from the region to reach its thriving boutiques, antique stores, and restaurants.

ROBERT LANDAU/THE PASADENA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU





9. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Vacant industrial and office buildings, dirty streets, high crime, and a shrinking population plagued Philadelphia's downtown by the early 1990s. A business improvement district, Center City District, formed in 1990 to stem the decline, and a public/private initiative dubbing South Broad Street the "Avenue of the Arts" in 1993 helped spark redevelopment in the city's cultural core, culminating in the 2001 opening of the \$265 million Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts. To jump-start residential growth, in the late 1990s Philadelphia implemented ten-year real estate tax abatements for the adaptive use of commercial buildings to housing as well as for new construction. With a vigorous marketing campaign focusing on young professionals and empty nesters, the district has grown by roughly 12,000 housing units since then, for a total population of nearly 90,000.

B. KRIST/GPIMC

10. Washington, D.C.

The year 1997 was arguably the turning point for the downtown of the nation's capital. That year, local property owners formed the downtown business improvement district (BID), covering 138 blocks from the White House to the U.S. Capitol. The group's first step was to dispatch safety/maintenance teams to clean streets and help pedestrians feel safe. Also in 1997, the Washington Wizards moved into the brand-new MCI Center (now called Verizon Center) downtown [right], encouraging dozens of new chain and local restaurants to open and spurring office development. That helped residential development to kick in, with more than 2,500 new housing units added to the BID between 2000 and 2005. Retail has been the slowest to bounce back, but national retailers have been returning in recent years, and with the help of \$73.6 million in tax increment financing bonds, the massive mixed-use Gallery Place opened in 2004, offering office, retail, entertainment, and residential components. **U**



KEITH BARRACLOUGH